

The Fourth Church Pulpit

AFRAID?

Easter Sunday

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH



A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:50-58, Mark 16:1-8

**"So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them;
and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."**

Mark 16:8 (NRSV)

One of the oldest and most threadbare Easter traditions is the "ministerial lecture" on why it's important to come to church on Sundays other than Easter. The lecture has many variations: the weak attempt at humorous rejoinder; the preacher says something like, "I want to take this opportunity to say Happy Thanksgiving, Merry Christmas, Happy New Year to all those I won't see until next Easter." It's pretty terrible I know, but a tradition is a tradition.

This year, I was thumbing through my own meager humorous resources and came across an essay with the timely and relevant title, "How to Be Impressive in the Pulpit." It was written by the late Charles Merrill Smith, who wrote "How to Become a Bishop Without Being Religious."

Smith begins his essay with the sober observation that the great preachers in the Bible have very short careers — most of them get run out of town, or worse, in short order. So the issue isn't greatness, it's being impressive and popular.

At the head of his recommended list of popular and impressive sermon topics is "heaven."

"No preacher ever got fired for preaching about heaven so long as he made it clear that he thought everyone in his congregation would get there."

In his "A Preaching Program Which Can't Miss" he has a specific sermon recommendation for Easter Sunday. "Looking Forward to a Good Old-Fashioned Heaven." And then this astute advice, apropos my introductory observations:

"Do not forget to give the Easter-only churchgoers a thorough lacing for their failure to show up the rest of the year. This gives the regulars a sense of their own righteousness and spiritual superiority, and the Easter-only crowd expects to catch it from the preacher because they always have. They will not mend their ways, of course, but they hardly feel they have been to church if you fail to flay them." [*And The Laugh Shall Be First*, William Willimon, p. 119]

Which reminded me of a wonderfully dry *Doonesbury* last week. A thoroughly modern couple is telling their son that it's time to start attending church as a family.

"'Didn't you think church was boring when you were a kid?' he asks his father. The father admits that, yes, he found church boring. But, his son has to put in pew time, like his mom and dad did. 'But what if I like it?' the boy asks. His startled parents respond: 'Like it? What do you mean? We'll cross to that bridge when we get there, honey.'"

So, if you like it, we'll be doing it again next Sunday, same time, same place. In the meantime this preacher is glad you're here today.

This is the day to be here. The flowers are beautiful; the music is exquisite; everybody looks wonderful; and even the weather isn't too bad. Except I know none of that is why you came.

Our flowers and music are very good, but you could see something similar on television. And you all do look wonderful, but you could dress up for brunch at the Fourth Seasons, the Drake, or Cartons and, in fact, your being here is going to make you late for that. No, I think I know why you're here, whether it's a weekly thing for you or once a year. It's the same reason I'm here.

It's because on this Sunday the real issue is the topic. It's because everybody knows that on Easter morning the Christian Church will be attending to basic questions: the meaning of life. . . the why of suffering, the mystery of death, and what's to become of us? We are here because on Easter Sunday an idea is bandied about, sung and read and prayed about, which if remotely true, is the most important idea in the world: an idea so expansive, so incredibly good that it might actually make a difference in the way we think about and plan for and live out the rest of our lives.

The idea can be expressed philosophically, theologically. And that is often what the preacher tries to do. But the fact is the idea grows out of a story of a Jewish rabbi who lived 2,000 years ago. There was nothing abstract about him.

His name was Jesus and when he was thirty he came from Nazareth into the region of lower Galilee, announcing to anyone who would listen that God's Kingdom was present, not in the Temple, not after death, but in the present tense, the here and now. And instead of merely lecturing on God's wonderfully welcoming and accepting love, he began to live as if he believed it were true. Someone once asked Carl Sandburg what the ugliest word in the English language was. He thought for a moment and said, "exclusive." Jesus simply ignored the structures of exclusivism which his and every society has. God's Kingdom was open to all, and so he sat down at table with sinners and talked with women as if they were equals and touched the untouchables and befriended those who did not have time to follow religious custom and in one magnificent gesture he undercut a whole culture's harshness about children by welcoming them, allowing them to interrupt him, and touching them and blessing them. After three years of teaching that openness and inclusivity and living it out, he came to Jerusalem. The crowds of Passover pilgrims erupted in patriotic fervor. They thought he was coming to the city to be its Messiah and king. So did the authorities who were thoroughly invested in the status quo — Temple officials and the Roman political and military hierarchy. They saw the evidence of sedition as crowds called him King. And, I believe, they recognized that his words and behavior actually did threaten their power and authority. So they did what they had to do — they arranged for his execution.

Professor John Dominic Crossan at DePaul University says that we moderns can't possibly imagine how easily they did that, how the crucifixion of a Jewish peasant was no big deal, how men and women died quickly and casually in an almost off-hand manner.

So he died, abandoned by his friends, humiliated by a mock trial and public whipping, left utterly alone on a Friday afternoon, hanging from a cross in the town garbage dump.

No one predicted or expected what happened next. In the earliest account in Mark's Gospel, three women come to the tomb where he had been buried to anoint the body with spices and oils according to custom. They worried about how they might move the stone away from the tomb. It's clear that they weren't expecting anything. It's also clear to literary historians that if someone were making it up for public relations purposes, he wouldn't have three women be the ones to be there. Women were not allowed to give testimony in legal proceedings; their culture did not regard them as reliable. A fiction writer would not even think of hanging the viability of his plot on the experience and memory of women. Unless, of course, he wasn't writing fiction; unless they were there.

When they arrive at the tomb, early in the morning of the first day of the week, they discover the stone already removed. And when they look inside they are stunned to see a young man who says the most remarkable thing:

"Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him. But go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him."

The Gospel of Mark portrays women in the most remarkable way. Jesus treats women with respect, as full human beings, intellectually and spiritually, politically — a very subversive notion at that time. Mark tells how women seem to understand, to get the point of Jesus, much more quickly than the men. In one memorable scene, as men simply refuse to hear him, when he tries to talk about his suffering and death, a woman pours costly perfume over his head, anointing him for death.

And as the story continues to his trial and public crucifixion, the men flee for their lives and only women are there at the end. And even now, as men hide behind locked doors in Jerusalem, women publicly come to his tomb.

Now they know. Now they know that they alone have the truth: they are stewards of the truth about Jesus. With the rays of the early morning sun filtering through the olive trees, and plants and flowers of the garden glistening in the gentle dew of morning, the three women should have embraced and wept profoundly and then dancing ecstatically, heads thrown back, whirling, hand in hand, laughing and then running, lifting skirts, still laughing, now shouting - "Peter, John, Andrew - Christ is risen" and the disciples awakened by the good news sit up and respond in unison: "He is risen indeed" and all join in four-part harmony, singing "Jesus Christ is Risen Today." [see Morton Kelsey, *Resurrection*]

Instead, recalls Mark:

"They went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

The end. Curtain falls, no credits, no music. Terror, fright, silence. "As an end to a story, this one is wholly unacceptable," one commentator says. [Patrick Wilson, *The Christian Century*, 3/1/94]

The ancient Scribes and copyists agree. There have been a number of attempts in history to add a more satisfactory ending to Mark.

Novelist Mary Gordon says about Mark's conclusion:

"How extraordinary, to end a heroic narrative with the words, 'they were scared, you see.'"
[*Incarnation*, edited by Alfred Corn, p. 24]

Well, who isn't afraid at this point?

"The world had died in the night" is the way G. K. Chesterton describes what it was like to watch as the man you thought was ushering in a new world, a new way to live, new hope, new future, was unceremoniously discarded by the real power and authority in this world.

Who isn't afraid that that's the way it is in this world? Noble ideas, optimism, hope, justice, compassion, freedom—none of them last long in the arenas where the real world plays out its script.

Schindler's List is not only about a magnificent story of heroism and altruism emerging from an unlikely and ordinary man, it is also about reality: the reality that while 1,200 were saved — and they now number more than all the surviving Jews in Poland — 6,000,000 died. The dear little girl in a red coat, a human exclamation point, a reminder that all of them are, we dare to believe, God's precious children — the little girl is not on Schindler's List. Who does not fear that truth is the Holocaust? Truth is Nazi officers eating a picnic lunch at a railroad siding with boxcar loads of human beings, broiling in the sun — on their way to the gas chamber. "I don't believe in God any more," someone said to me after seeing the movie.

Who isn't afraid? John Updike wrote a poem to a friend of his who had died, a literary critic named Ed Sissman with whom Updike apparently lunched on occasion.

"I think a lot about you, Ed.
Tell me why.
You told me, lunching at Joseph's
forseeing death, that it would be
a comfort to believe. My faith,
a kind of rabbit frozen in the
headlights scrambled for cover in
the roadside brush of gossip: your
burning beams passed by."
[*Collected Poems 1953-1993*, p. 151]

And Terry Anderson, near the beginning of his seven years as a hostage in Lebanon, struggles with faith issues he had never had to think about before. He wrote in his journal:

"I reach so hard to touch God, concentrating, waiting for something, some acknowledgment from him that I exist, that He's listening. I get back only blankness." [*Den of Lions*, p. 75]

Who isn't afraid that there is no meaning to it all? That at the last, there is only darkness and silence. Who, if I may up the stakes theologically, hasn't accommodated to that a bit, afraid intellectually, spiritually, to believe more, afraid to entertain the notion that there is more to the story than darkness and silence? Is that not what happened to the women? Afraid that crucifixion was the end of the story, they were even more afraid that it wasn't the end?

Professor Hans Kung seems to know intuitively that the issue is not academic, but finally very personal. The question is ultimately, what is to become of us all - of me?

"The Easter message is that Jesus did not die into nothingness. . . but into God. And so our last road does not lead into nothingness, but into this most primal ground, from mortal darkness to God's eternal light." [*On Being a Christian*, p. 358- 360]

When I came home from seeing *Schindler's List*, it took me a while to think it through. And I turned instinctively to the texts that the Christian Church has always read and would be hearing again this Easter. The Psalms, which God's people, both Jews and Christians, have recited and sung for centuries, in good times and bad:

"For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling.
Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful ones."

The words of a Pharisee by the name of Paul writing twenty years after Jesus' life from the Turkish city of Ephesus over to Corinth:

"Listen, I tell you a mystery
Death has been swallowed up in victory
Where, O death, is your victory?
Thanks be to God, who gives us the
victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

And I turned to what I regard as one of the most precious books our century has produced, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, a modern martyr, a Christian trying to live faithfully in a world which had gone mad, and who because of his insistent hope, courageous faith, his simple trust that his allegiance and life belonged to God, had been arrested by the Nazis.

I was looking for what Bonhoeffer wrote from prison as Easter approached.

And I found this — Easter Day 1943, to his parents:

"At last I am allowed to write to you again. I do so want you to know that I am having a happy Easter in spite of everything. One of the great advantages of Good Friday and Easter Day is that they take us out of ourselves and make us think of other things, of life and its meaning and its suffering and its events. It gives us such a lot to hope for." [p. 36]

One year later, as it becomes apparent that he may not ever be released from prison, he wishes his parents happiness and then:

"It's a year now since I actually heard a hymn. But the music of the inner ear can often surpass what we hear physically. I get on particularly well with the Easter hymns." And then, knowing, I suspect, what was ahead: "Do we not attach more importance to the act of dying than to death itself? To live in the light of the resurrection — that is the meaning of Easter." [p. 153]

As the allies closed in and the Third Reich tried to finish its business, more Jews were killed as were many political prisoners. Bonhoeffer was moved to Flossenburg prison April 8, 1945. A British officer wrote later:

"Pastor Bonhoeffer held a little service and spoke to us in a manner that reached the hearts of all of us. . . He had hardly finished his last prayer when the door opened and two men in civilian clothes came in and said, 'Prisoner Bonhoeffer, get ready to come with us.' Those words, 'Come with us' — for all the prisoners they had come to mean only one thing — the scaffold. We bade him goodbye. He drew me aside. 'This is the end' he said. 'For me, the beginning of life.'"

The next day he was hanged. [p. 14]

It was the music of Easter he could hear best in his inner ear.

Terror — amazement — fleeing in fear — then silence — is how the first Easter story ends.

There isn't a one of us who wouldn't have acted in the same way. There isn't a one of us, despite our firm resolve and determination, who hasn't failed to be brave, who hasn't denied and betrayed our Lord and his truth, his justice and peace, his Kingdom. It's all right, he says: all is forgiven. Start again, and again and again. Never be discouraged. My patience — my grace — my forgiveness — my love for you is eternal.

And the story concludes this way because the end is not an empty tomb, but a living Christ who goes before us in the world, a God whose justice and gentleness and peace and love we will see, not in religious ceremony, but in the world. That was the command and the promise. Go to Galilee. You will see him there.

So — go into the world this Easter day: the beautiful — terrible world God loves; the world of human betrayal and tragedy, and also human glory and courage; a world which stuns us with its random and meaningless suffering but also its goodness, its potential for renewal and rebirth and recreation.

Go to Galilee. . . the future. Whatever is there for you, do not be afraid. He goes ahead of you.

Christ is Risen.

He is risen, indeed!

Amen.